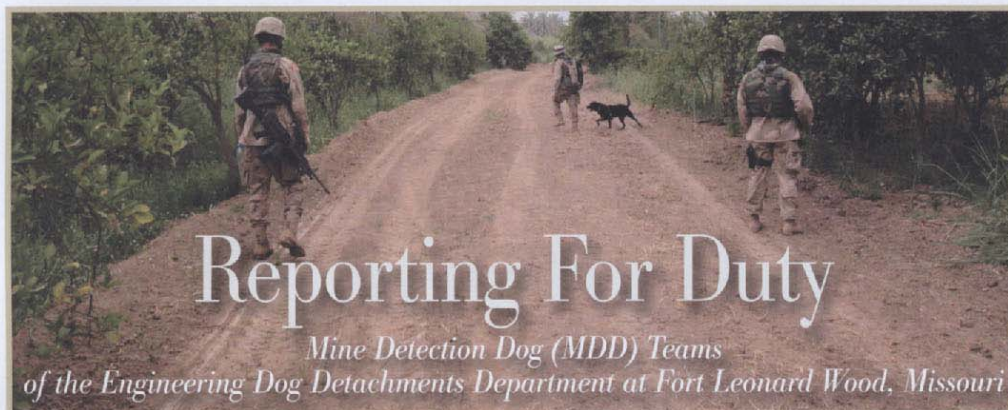




## IN THEIR DEBT

by Shelley Bueche



Searching a dirt road for landmines, the handler prepares to send his dog out again. The other two soldiers act as security so the handler can concentrate on his dog.

**T**hirty-four mine detachment teams (MDD) live and train at Fort Leonard Wood, Missouri, deep in the heart of Ozark Mountain country. Fort Leonard Wood, the United States Army base and home to U.S. Army Engineer, Police and Chemical Corps School, is named for Major General Leonard Wood (1860-1927).



The MDD teams are trained to detect land mines by sniffing for the chemical scent of an explosive device, then alerting their handler in the event of a positive result. In January 2007, I had a conversation with Mr. James Pettit, program manager for the engineer mine-detection dogs at the United States Army Engineer School at Ft. Leonard Wood, Missouri.

**JUST LABS:** So nice to speak with you today. For starters, if you would tell me a bit about yourself and your background in working with canines.

**PETTIT:** My background is in civilian law enforcement, for about fifteen years. In 2001, the U.S. Army approached me about putting together a Mine Detection Dog program. The program was fully implemented in 2002.

**JUST LABS:** How long have dogs been serving in the military?

**PETTIT:** Since World War II. The challenge for mine dogs then was to find metal. They didn't understand that explosives gave off an odor. We

had mine dogs in Vietnam, many were Labs. With today's global war on terrorism, mine-detection dogs are needed once again.

**JUST LABS:** Can you tell me about a typical day on the job for you? For an MDD dog handler?

**PETTIT:** I am considered to be the program manager, so I assist and advise officers. I don't supervise dogs on a daily basis, rather I spot-check and am responsible for quality control. The handlers have assigned duties for the day. They check on the dogs first thing in the morning. Someone is assigned to be with the dogs overnight. Each handler is responsible for checking the dog's temperature, their daily weight, and seeing whether or not the dog is ready to work that day.

**JUST LABS:** How do you know if a dog is ready for work that day, and what do you do in that case?

**PETTIT:** The dog may be sick, or just not ready to work that particular day. They may go see the veterinarian on duty, or they may rest for the day.

JUST LABS

### A Typical Day for Mine Detection Dogs

This is a typical day for a MDD team at Fort Leonard Wood. While on deployment, the same routine is followed as closely as the mission will allow – grooming, kennel maintenance and exercise/play is done everyday.

#### Monday, Wednesday, and Friday:

0700-0900: Physical training. This consists of a Soldier/Canine period and a Soldier only period. Both the dog and the Soldier get a workout to build endurance and the Soldier/Canine bond. The Soldier does most of the work.

0900-1000: Grooming and kennel maintenance. The dogs and their kennel space are checked and cleaned to keep the Mine Detection Dogs healthy and in top condition.

1000-1200: Mine Detection Dog training is conducted.

1200-1300: Lunch

1300-1600: Mine Detection Dog training is conducted.

1600-1700: This time is reserved for light exercise and play for the dogs after which they are bedded down in their kennels for the night.

#### Tuesday and Thursday:

0800-0900: Grooming and kennel maintenance.

0900-1200: Mine Detection Dog training is conducted.

1200-1300: Lunch

1300-1500: Mine Detection Dog training is conducted.

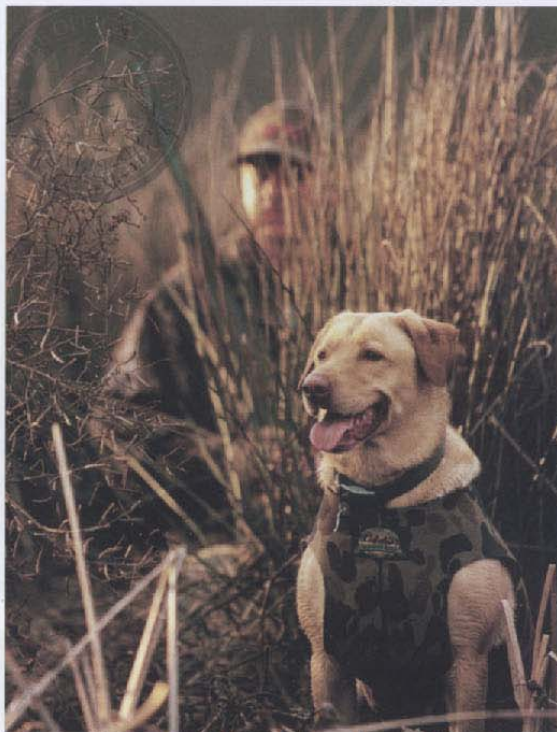
1500-1600: Play and bed down

1600-1700: Military training for the Soldier.

*(Saturday and Sunday is reserved for rest)*

### United States War Dogs Association

Dogs have been assisting soldiers since WWII. The United States War Dogs Association has organized a petition to commemorate our canine veterans for their loyal service on behalf of all Americans with a stamp honoring their bravery. If you would like to sign their online War Dog Stamp petition, visit the United States War Dogs site. The Association also sponsors "Military Care K-9." They coordinate donations of K-9 Care Packages of K-9 jerky, dog bowls, rope chew, dog booties, and other miscellaneous items that are sent to canine teams in Africa, Afghanistan, Dubai, Iraq, Kuwait, and Qatar. For more details, visit The United States War Dog Association online: [www.uswardogs.org](http://www.uswardogs.org).



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Mine-dog handler preparing to search for a safe lane in a minefield.



A soldier and his MDD exchange greetings in a Bradley Fighting Vehicle – as they ride to a mission site.

**JUST LABS:** How exactly are the canine teams trained?

**PETTIT:** They are trained to recognize odors, imprinting. They are trained to find the odor source under various conditions, such as deep soil, or different weather or wind conditions. The dogs sniff for land mines at various heights, and they are trained to give a "positive indicator" just as bomb dogs do. They sit quietly upon a positive detection so they don't disturb the land mine.

**JUST LABS:** Where do the teams go after they are trained in Missouri?

**PETTIT:** I can't go into specifics, only to say that the teams are in places where the U.S. Army is today.

**JUST LABS:** Could you tell me about the MDD team's work in the field.

**PETTIT:** The handler knows the dog is there to protect them and save their life if necessary. The team will go to a mission site for land mine clearance. In the military environment, there are moving land-mines. The team is responsible for "proofing" their equipment before it is used, and then checking an area for potential threats.

JUST LABS

**JUST LABS:** What do you do once an area has been checked for land mines?

**PETTIT:** It is then marked with a red sign and instructions written in the language of that country.

**JUST LABS:** How prevalent are land mines?

**PETTIT:** There are millions of land mines around the world. Land mines are terrible! They are prevalent in third world countries; they are very cheap to use.

**JUST LABS:** Have there been any casualties with the MDD program?

**PETTIT:** No, not one. The teams are well-trained.

Mine dogs resting in an air-conditioned HMMV during a mission break.



**JUST LABS:** How vital are the MDD teams, for the military?

**PETTIT:** The dogs are a key tool in explosive detection for the military.

**JUST LABS:** I have heard there are several Labrador retrievers in your program and with the military in general.

**PETTIT:** Yes, the military is moving toward using Labradors exclusively. They are friendly and send a nice message. Labs have fantastic noses. For example, people smell a hot pizza, but dogs smell the cheese, if the cheese is going bad, each pepper on the pizza, and so on. By the way, we don't feed our dogs pizza, this is just an example. The dogs are very well cared for.

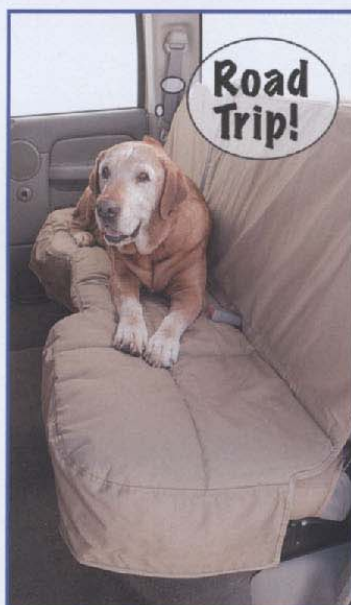
**JUST LABS:** Thanks so much, it has been tremendous speaking with you about such an exciting program. If people want to learn more about becoming a vendor for the military or canine training with the military, where do you suggest they get information?

**PETTIT:** All dogs trained for the military originally come through Lackland Air Force base in San Antonio, Texas. The Department of Defense has a Military Working Dog Center and you can visit them online at: [www.dodmwd.lackland.af.mil](http://www.dodmwd.lackland.af.mil).



Shelley Bueche is a freelance writer and member of Dog Writer's Association of America. She and her family reside in Central Texas, and they share their home with a senior Lab, Belle, and two other

canine companions, Brownie and Boomer. She writes extensively about working dogs and marvels at the contributions they have made in our daily lives.



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